

Will Bush, the state's 'business manager,' rides herd on sprawling DGS

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Will Bush doesn't come off as much of a complainer--for one thing, he probably doesn't have the time.

Being the director of a company with 4,000 employees and a budget of over half a billion dollars doesn't leave a lot of room for whining. But when the head of the California Department of General Services is asked why he's slowly rotating his left arm in circles before sitting down for a morning interview, he doesn't hesitate to share the whole story.

"This year at nationals I ended up jamming my shoulder. The problem is, I'm addicted to water skiing," Bush says. "And when you can't stop doing it, your body never rests."

The accident happened in mid-August. Bush, who moonlights (or, more appropriately, sunlights) as a world-class professional water skier, was competing in a slalom circuit at the national championships in West Village, Calif., when his ski clipped on a narrow buoy, yanking his arm backwards. The 55-year-old spun around, losing his equilibrium, and slammed into the wake, skipping across the water like a flat stone away from the speedboat.

"I came up and I thought the boat was over here, but it was actually over here," he says, moving his good arm from the front of his face to the right side.

It wasn't the first major accident that the businessman has experienced. A decade ago, Bush ruptured his Achilles tendon, landing him in crutches for five months. Doctors told Bush he would never ski again. It was crushing news for the man who had dedicated his entire recreational life to the adrenaline-boiling sport. But after several months of rehabilitation--daily lap swimming and stretching--the muscle fibers in his heel grew back. Once they did, Bush slipped the foot back into a rubber ski binding.

These days, when Bush talks to colleagues on his cell phone during off-business hours, he's often sitting on the dock of the private water-skiing lake he built with

his wife, Elaine, several years ago in Elk Grove. Since becoming DGS director, Bush's mind never drifts too far from his work. He calls his new job a 24-seven, 365-day commitment. So even during those fun days in the sun, Bush keeps a close proximity on two cell phones and a laptop.

" sit on the dock and do work in between ski rides," he says.

Bush talks about water skiing like he's found his Zen, and a man in his position needs any relief he can get, directing a company with the ambitious title of "California's business manager."

In the last month, the diversely operated business has focused an impressive amount of attention on leading the state in cutting-edge environmental projects. One new initiative increases funding for the construction of more energy-efficient classrooms, with the idea that children who breathe better air and capture more natural lighting will learn better. Another project has California purchasing nearly 9,000 "green" computers for state employees, utilizing equipment that contains decreased levels of chemicals and reduces greenhouse-gas emissions.

Which is why the thought of the company's highest-ranking official standing atop a pair of competitive water skies while ripping through the calm water of a manmade lake makes for such a curious picture. After all, the "carbon footprint" a speedboat leaves in its wake doesn't exactly benefit the sport's ecological reputation.

So how does Bush balance his conflicting passions of sport and conservation? "The lake is on 45 acres, and I planted literally 6,000 trees, creating my own little preserve," he says. "When folks talk to me about running my boat, [I tell them the] trees are adding to the other side."

Schwarzenegger appointed Bush as DGS director on the first day of summer 2007, and the position has taken him further away from the water than he ever expected in his adult life (he boasts that he once skied 255 days out of 365). "It's taken a bite into my skiing," he says. "I've watched my performance level deteriorate a little bit. This year isn't as intense as others when I've had more time to focus on the sport."

Back on land, Bush focuses on making DGS a forward-thinking industry. He stresses community responsibility. This involves engaging the public with green

transportation projects, overseeing library and mentoring programs in local schools, and educating school districts on the importance of green classrooms. "I think you need to be a great steward in whatever community you are in. ... We have a number of different programs going right now to help reduce energy consumption, relax resources with recycling, and buy green products."

But Bush never pits himself too far from his first passion. Occasionally, the director will look up from his desk, out the giant plate window from his office on the eighth floor of the Ziggurat, and catch a glimpse of the shimmering Sacramento River below.

"I see the river and I think about home. Because of the diversity of this job and the many issues that pop up, I've had to set aside the other side of my life."

He continues, "My [water skiing] life was going before I got into this line of work, and it will be going long after I leave state employment."